The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ASSISTANT SECRETARY WILLIAM HODDING CARTER, III

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This transcript was not edited by Assistant Secretary Carter]

Q: Today is the 6th of December 1993 and this is part of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program. Do you use William Hodding Carter or Hodding Carter?

CARTER: I'd rather just use Hodding Carter.

Q: Hodding Carter III.

CARTER: The only reason for the III is just because there is a son and my dad who is by far the more famous, has got a lot of "Hodding Carter's" around him, not me.

Q: Ah well, let history judge. To begin, for the historian, with could you give a short background before we get to your involvement with the Carter campaign and all that.

CARTER: I grew up in a newspaperman, writer family in Mississippi. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, but basically think of myself as a Mississippian because I lived there from the time I was one on. My father had put out two newspapers, one in Louisiana which was a little tabloid daily. Started it the day after the banks closed which fought Huey Long. And after 1936 in Mississippi, in what was generally regarded to be a very progressive newspaper, for its place and time, and a courageous editor which he certainly was. I grew up a little bit however in Washington, DC because dad was in the National Guard that got activated in 1940. So in many ways Washington was always my second home because we were here about April of 1941 and we were here until after the "J" day in '45. My education was in the public schools in Mississippi, at Exeter for awhile and then I went to Princeton thinking I wanted to go into the Foreign Service. Went into the Woodrow Wilson School, graduated from there.

Q: What year did you graduate.

CARTER: 1957, born in 1935. Went immediately into the Marines, being in the Navy ROTC. When my service was up, active duty, I went home to Mississippi, thinking I would give what I thought I owed at least one look at newspaper. Which was my father's paper and profession and then stayed for 17 years. In the years prior to coming to work for President Carter as spokesman of the State Department, I was variously a reporter, managing editor then editor then eventually editor-publisher of that little paper, The Delta Democrat Times in Greenville, Mississippi. I worked for Johnson in the middle of the '64 campaign in Washington, I was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard '65-'66, and otherwise was in Greenville full time from '59 until '77.

Q: Your paper, did this have much world coverage or was this pretty much on the local scene.

CARTER: Our newspaper conceived of itself as being intensely a paper of place and covering the place. And its editorials were intensely of place. However, there is a second track of experience there which certainly formed my own view of what the paper ought to do. Best represented by the fact that we were in Washington from 1941 April on because dad at the time of Munich had written an editorial saying, "This means World War II." It had been seen by the National Guard commander locally the day after that editorial who said, "Well Hodding if you're so smart, why don't you join the Guard and be part of the buildup." And then Roosevelt activated the Mississippi-Alabama guard because he didn't think anybody would notice in November of 1940 as part of his buildup. Secondly, dad was, on the basis of his experience overseas, if not his education before then and both actually, was very much an internationalist, very much in that Southern strain as opposed to the growing protectionism of the new South. And had always been one who believed that you had to look out even to deal with what was inside. And then by pure luck, he heard Dean Acheson's speech about the Marshall Plan which was not called a Marshall Plan, in Cleveland, Mississippi, in May '47. And then was on the podium because he was receiving an Honorary Degree from Harvard in June of '47 when General Marshall sketched out the idea. Which Acheson had been a precursor of in his speech at Delta Council Day in Cleveland, Mississippi the previous month. Dad came back from that and said, alright this is it, this is the way we've got to go. And so all of that was in the background. In terms of how we extended our coverage. Because of that USIA sort of used our paper, among many others, as a regional stop-in place for all the international visitors to come down and see it.

Q: I might add for the record that even those who knew nothing about Mississippi knew of your paper because from the '30's on it was considered a crusading paper. It was preeminent.

CARTER: For dad it was a very small town paper, to read what either he wrote or even what I wrote in the late '50's and '60's makes you understand that everything is a matter of context. But within the context, it was in fact a very crusading newspaper on questions of race. Dad won the Pulitzer Prize in '46 for editorials on racial tolerance, basically attacking home-grown Bill Bow and others, ranting at the time. We were in that community a part of a very interesting tradition of a family named Percy. Which had, and still is, an involvement in community and in the world and nation. - which is one generation, you mean Alexander Percy. His father Leroy Percy, had been United States Senator, an internationalist old-bourbon defeated in fact by the first great red-neck, redeemer of the red-necks, so-called, it's all in quotation marks. In the revolt of the red-necks. And whose son, I mean Alexander Percy's adopted son, was Walker Percy, National Book Award winner and writer and man of great luster. In any case it was a tradition in that community that grievous walls were not confined to the Delta but were quite a bit outward. So we tried to run the paper as a local paper which made sure the readers who were going to be offended by its editorials, would understand that it had an interest in the community beyond its editorial viewpoint. And at the same time to speak to the greater world outside as much as we could within the limits of a very small paper. I mean you know, we did not average a lot of pages. This was a tiny paper in a poverty stricken region. But within that context we did a lot.

Q: Well how did you get involved with the Carter campaign and then on to the...

CARTER: I got involved in politics, I'd insisted I never would because there was far too many killings in Mississippi, civil rights people. Which impaired me to get involved in civil rights politics which got me into the reform wing of the Democratic party, which got me into national Democratic party activity, which got me looking actively for someone who could block George Wallace in the South. Keep him from having a veto over the party. And hopefully get elected as the most liberal possible candidate that you could get elected in a not very liberal time. Jimmy Carter ended up fitting all those bills at the end of my day in 1976. I would add however that I was not brought to Jimmy Carter not by my own judgement, frankly. But by the insistence of two people. Both of whom I trusted because of political civil rights work. One was Andy Young and one was the woman who later became my wife, Patricia Derian, who was a Democratic National Committee woman for a reform faction for those days in Mississippi. And the two of them kept saying that this was the guy who could both beat Wallace and within the context of the things we cared about, could carry them forward nationally. So I went to work for him after the Democratic Convention for some meaningless title in the Campaign. The woman who became my wife was the Deputy Campaign Manager, I was a gofer of some kind. Worked out of Atlanta, the election takes place and he wins, I go back to my newspaper which I was running. And sat around waiting for somebody to call me. And nobody called. Eventually, in early January, Dick Meiss, back in the State Department again now but active in the transition then, called me up and said, "Hi, who have you made mad over here?" And I said, over where? He said in the Government of Staff, he said, every time we put your name up for something, you get turned down. I said, nobody that I know of. He said, well, let me just see. About 2 hours later the phone rings and the operator says, "Governor Carter is on the line." Jimmy Carter comes up and he says, "Hi. I thought you told me back in 1975 that you would never leave your newspaper and that's why you couldn't come work for me then." I said, "Governor, for God's sake, I just got through working for you for four months." And which I said, I have to tell you one thing, I come from the wrong tradition, I can't lie. He said, "That's all right, I can't either." And that was it, so I got the job.

Q: It was Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs from 1977 to 1980. How did Secretary Vance use you?

CARTER: That's also worth asking. They had combined the two jobs of Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Department spokesman, sometimes separated, sometimes combined, always in transition over there. They combined them for me. Vance was not a man who much believed in the media, he certainly did not feel comfortable doing a great deal of public engagement with the press. And he frankly thought that his function was not the public advocacy so much as it was the actual negotiation and the pressing forward of policy. I say his background, imposed upon that the fact that we didn't know each other. Add to that, at least some of the people who were in the Department, in career, particularly distrusted some of the politicals. And with good reason distrusted a Mississippi editor arriving out of nowhere to become State Department spokesman. Phil Habib particularly, spent several months trying to making sure I had no water to carry at all. I say that with great fondness. He was Under Secretary of Political Affairs.

Q: He was basically the top professional and not one to suffer fools.

CARTER: He was engaged constantly. And I always respected Phil because I always saw him coming and when he hit me, he hit me where I could see it. He worked fairly hard on his old friend and associate, Cy Vance, to have him go slow as to how much latitude they would give me. So it took me several months before Vance actually let me go out there with anything more than a piece of paper that the system produces for the spokesman. Unfortunately, it took the Senate several months before confirming me, so I couldn't actually function, so I got to learn a lot by watching and by traveling without actually working. So that by the time I got to be full-fledged spokesman, which is to say confirmed as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs which portion had to be confirmed. I knew more than I knew before. Let me say in passing of course, I had been a member of the Atlantic Council for 8 years prior to that and had been one of the early founding members of the American Council of Young Political Leaders which ran exchange programs with everybody from the Russians to the Japanese to the Europeans, political exchanges. So had not been entirely confined to Mississippi in what I did in my interest. Nonetheless, basically my experience was limited. By about the middle of '77 however, the Secretary, for some of the reasons I just got through saying, and the fact that I expect by then he decided he could trust me and Habib had decided he could trust me, they gave me lot more latitude than a number of Spokesmen often have.

Q: What do you mean when you say he gave you more latitude than other spokesmen?

CARTER: There are two ways to deal with the official guidance. Which is the written pieces of paper which are produced in an elaborate dance through all the various offices about the questions which we anticipated will arise for the Press spokesman to answer at the daily briefings. One way is to send a person out there and to say, you will not depart from the word, the comma, the sentence. The other is to assume that something is happening down there which is organic and they may ask some questions which aren't on the guidance and may in fact may be usefully led, or instructed or guided in directions which a little bit of spontaneity will allow the spokesperson. And I was given a great deal of leeway for spontaneity and guidance beyond the written guidance and for by-play with the press corps in that briefing room. It actually works better that way. If it's going to work however, then you also have to have the spokesperson kept as little in the dark as possible. And when I say as possible, only a fool would sit in a chair and say that he as spokesman or spokeswoman, ever knew everything. Because nobody ever has. Parenthesis-except perhaps Margaret Tutwiler. Margaret is probably the exception that I would offer to that because she in truth was the alter ego of Jim Baker. But other than that, the best of them, the best was McCloskey, but I mean the best of them would go out there naked sometimes. But within a range of possibilities. Where I was, was on the upper range of being informed and that made it possible for me to both avoid the trap and to offer enough in addition to the guidance. Actually I thought to make the process work better for the building and for the Secretary.

Q: How were you kept informed. I mean what was sort of the routine that would keep you informed.

CARTER: It was both just the formal business of the Secretary's 7th floor meetings for the Assistant Secretaries first thing in the morning. It was first thing before that I would go in to see him at 7:30 and talk through the issues that the Press Office had already identified. As indeed at the end of day, I would go up and see him to talk through what had happened. And also at mid-morning, sometime between 10:30 and 11:30, I'd go back up and see him. To talk again. That was sort of the direct contact with the Secretary which was issues-specific, vis-a-vis things that had just occurred that we need to decide-I don't like the guidance I have; here's what I would suggest I say despite what the paper says; or he saying this guidance won't do; or Warren Christopher's case might be, often the Deputy would have to take that job; that's one way. Another way is simply having a good enough relationship with the bureaus within the building, with the press people and the Assistant Secretaries, where I could pick up the phone and ask-come on, give me a break, you know this is nonsense, I can't go out to say this; or you and I both know from so-and-so that this is a good was for us to get in trouble, why don't we..." Or they would volunteer, another way is through your staff, which itself ought to be networked around the building in the various bureaus. Another way which helped a great deal, frankly, in this case was that I was political and that I had come out of the Carter campaign. So that in some instances, without having to refer to the Secretary, I could use the implied weight for somebody to pick up the phone and talk to Jody Powell or supposedly, but not real, the President. You know, to say they're stone walling me on stuff and that was another, but that of course after not too long, everybody knew what worth that actually was. But initially...

Q: To get to the system, why would you feel, I mean you're part of the team, you're working for the Secretary of State, why would anybody stone wall you rather than give you ammunition to use?

CARTER: Because as in all Administrations, there were holders of policy which had not yet been totally resolved in which the issues between bureaus, let's take my wife's bureau, the Human Rights Bureau, the most likely antagonist the Latin American Bureau or the East Asian Bureau, that those issues were still very hot and heavy. And so the guidance would become very bland, worse than bland. It would often be a misstatement because somebody's hand had been on it last. And there was an assumption made which wasn't true, the issue had been resolved in favor of one or the other. This is normal. I find this to be standard issue for any bureaucracy. It just to be this bureaucracy. Not all matters had worked their way through. Point one. Point two. There's always the reality that even when policy has been pronounced and is supposedly understood as Secretary Shultz once said, "No issue is too important not to be refought repeatedly," and despite the sense that there was a policy made, there was still a tendency in some quarters to continue to fight it. So that caused a problem and sometimes, I mean what the hell, it was just because knowledge is power and because not everything is sweetness and light between me and everybody else, or between bureaus. There was just a withholding of information for the sake of retention of information.

Q: Did you ever find, okay there's an issue, it's on the front page of the Washington Post. The issue has not been resolved between the Bureau of Human Rights and ARA, did you find that sometimes, you had to say something in a way resolving the issue whether they liked it or not.

CARTER: I don't want to pretend I had more latitudes than I had, but what I would do in a case like that is, I would then talk to the Secretary or to Chris and I would talk to Jody if it were a matter that rose to that level. Because every morning there was a conference call between State and the White House and CIA and Defense.

Q: You were one of the people who could actually talk to Jody Powell.

CARTER: That's right and that was a direct contact. And there was, I would say, a prior contact method where I could call him about anytime. And I would try to say-Alright look, I know there are 10 of us here but we're going to have to do better than this. Again, this sounds harder than the way I would have approached it, I'm still a junior guy. Anyway, I would suggest there was quite a bit, that we would have to do better than this and see if we couldn't work it out. And the Secretary would, you know, the way it'd work was sometimes bureaus would discover what policy was from what I said.

Q: In a way it's more to the system than endemic to the person. I mean if somebody has to talk for the Department of State that becomes policy and no matter what it is you're the point person for that and some of these things which are bureaucratic battles find themselves, well it's a fait accompli, at a certain point.

CARTER: Well at a moment that's true, that would happen, did happen. But there is of course a counter, there is a reverse to that and that is often the spokesman with a little imaginative guidance would sometimes talk as though there were policy when there wasn't one. That is to say he was not selling one but would try to blow as much smoke as possible to give an appearance that underneath all those billows was actually something tangent.

Q: Did you find that you were able to get away with sometimes "I really can't talk about that, it hasn't been decided."

CARTER: I'm a total believer in the responsibility not the possibility but the responsibility of the spokesman saying for at least two reasons often: " I simply don't have anything for you on that, I'm not going to be able to deal with that." One is it keeps you from venturing into territory where you might in fact have to lie. "Have to lie," it's not exactly a formulation that I accept. But you would be tempted to lie to escape the consequences of a question. And the other is to be believable. I mean sometimes you've just got to be able to say, "Hey, you know." I was more often tempted to say, "Give me a break, you do not think that I am going to answer a question like that. I mean, you know this is simply outside the game." And let me say here parenthetically again, the reason I say that I would find it almost impossible to understand why it would be necessary to lie is that on the most basic issues about which you cannot tell the truth-intelligence operations, military operations-if you have established the formulation that these are simply matters about which you will not talk in any instance, the failure to respond to specific questions about specific instances, is not in itself an answer. But if of course you've allowed yourself to dither in and out, sometimes talking about it and sometimes not, then you ass is grass, as the saying goes. At that point, your failure to respond is implicitly an answer even if it's not true. I mean even if that's the wrong conclusion. But, there is that old wonderful permanent Foreign Office Under Secretary quote: "In which he's talking to the reporters and he says, you think that we lie to you and then you discover we don't. And then you make a bigger mistake, you think we tell you the truth." Which is of course half the trick.

Q: How did you find the press corps.

CARTER: Well the first thing that shocked me about them was that they were, in those days at any rate, probably better informed, better educated and better, more aware of at least the recent foreign policy history of the United States and the case of some of the best foreign policy of the United States in the 20th century than any of us who were political. And indeed many of those who were in specific bureaus. I mean these were men, for the most part, they were almost all men, who really were pros. Bernie Gwertzman was buried in the material when he wasn't writing about it. He thought about it all the time and he talked to everybody all the time. The same is true of the Kalb brothers. I mean in the more limited medium of television, nevertheless, they knew a great deal. Marvin had worked over in the Soviet Union in government. But I don't mean to say just those obvious ones. Dick Valeriani was first rate and tough. They scared the hell out of me. Because they did in fact know more than I knew. And the only thing that I could offer that they didn't know was the specific policy formulation, evolution and cerebralmentum. And there was a guy named Bill Beecher who had been a New York Times reporter who Kissinger bugged because he was infuriated by something that Beecher had run. And Bill later worked for Jerry Ford's Defense Department as spokesman and then was on the Boston Globe by the time I got there. When Bill had come in and closed the door for a little background chat, the one thing that I could be sure of was that he was going to tell me things that I didn't know. Because he would have just worked the heck out of agencies and defense departments and building sources on the esoterica of weapons and the like. And I frankly didn't have that depth to really deal with him. Hank Truitt, first rate fellow, first rate old pro, then there was the Baltimore Sun, the young ones, Roy Gutman, just won the Pulitzer Prize for covering Bosnia, passionate guy but very earnest and hard charging. For Reuters, the news magazine guys, actually there was just a hell of a good press corps. They were almost to the last one, serious. Don Oberdorfer, for the Washington Post, aside from being a gentleman and a scholar, I mean he really knew his stuff and does. He's retired now. And I loved working with them. Even on the bad days.

Q: What were some of the issues, I'm looking through here and you've got Panama right off the bat, the Panama Canal, relations with China, opening of Vietnam, NATO and the neutron bomb.

CARTER: The joke was, we hit the ground running in the Carter administration except we were running in 14 different directions simultaneously. Before I was confirmed, they had gone and made the famous march in retreat from Moscow, on expanding the SALT base, we had gone to the Middle East to start a process by the end of which it so frightened Sadat and Begin that they got together in Jerusalem. That was said facetiously but not totally. We had launched a totally different approach to South Africa. With the Vice President having been sent down there to say things which were responsible for the biggest wipe-out of progressives in the South African elections. Because he said the fatal words-one man, one vote-down there. We in fact set out to do what more interested Mr. Brzezinski than Mr. Vance. That was in fact to finish the China policy, a fall-back ignition. Where he decided to fulfil the alleged agenda of the last 5 presidents on the Panama Canal. We had a lot of things, very hard, very early and possibly used up a massive amount of political chips on the Panama Canal alone, in getting that thing through. And then all the inadvertence, from the 4 years, but I mean the most obvious being the taking of the hostages. The Jonestown tirade wipe-out, a horrible thing. In fact, I had made the decision to let the cameras into the newsroom, this was May. But I have to tell you about a person who before he came up he was so contemptuous of television as to be almost unbelievable. I was a subscriber to a number of supplementary news services for my paper, the Washington Post service, and the Christian Science Monitor and others. And therefore thought the television being lightning-flash journalism, meant nothing to me. I don't even watch it, to be honest. But I was taken by the arguments that the television correspondents. Largely on the argument, which is a point what I am getting ready to say, largely on the argument that nobody'd give a damn on what went on inside the briefings, generally. And for the most part, in those first couple of years that was true. Jonestown changed it and we suddenly were there nonstop. Spike Dubs getting killed and the first takeover of the Embassy in Tehran, same day, early '79, February. I mean that same day, same night. Those 2 things really should have been a warning because suddenly the press came in and stayed in the room for some time. That is probably the television. But obviously the takeover to Iran and the decision, since we weren't going to do anything militarily, we would continue to talk about it. A fated decision or fateful. Made suddenly that briefing room a mass media cockpit, which it had never been before. From early November, I mean from the takeover on.

Q: How did you feel about it turning into that?

CARTER: While there was some impression abroad out there that the pressure must have been terrible or that it changed the nature of my work. The reality is, it was easier dealing with that than almost anything else because we never had anything new to say. I mean they were just variations of the same theme, over and over. It was deadly dull simply because we would weave around the issue. In was in retrospect a terrible mistake, I mean, I say that because I thought at the time we were doing exactly the right thing. But I mean we weren't. We should have, after about 3 weeks, said: Look, there's nothing we have to add about the subject, our position is well know, we are working toward that end, but to continue to discuss it serves nobody except the people holding the hostages and goodbye, thank you. And while there is in fashion the notion that you can't say no to the media. We ought to say no anytime you want to. And if you have the guts to last a few days, they don't have the attention span of a flea. They'll go jump on something else.

Q: Going back to Jonestown, how did that hit you because it seemed like the Department, it was a very tricky situation, there was political involvement, the whole business. And the State Department didn't come out of that with flying colors as far as how it was handled.

CARTER: It was almost impossible things. In which again if only we were as wise going forward as we are going back. For myself, modesty on that subject begins on a Saturday night dinner party, I think, or a Friday night dinner party, in which my mother is patched through by the Communications Center to where I am, I was over at Tom and Joan Braden's. My mother says, "Bridge Murphy is calling me up from San Francisco, he says that he lost one of his photographers down in a place called Guyana." I said, "Mother, there's nothing going on with any San Francisco Examiner photographer in Guyana because if there was I'd know about it." And so she hangs up reassured and all that, she calls Bridge in San Francisco, she lives in New Orleans. He was trying to call me and he calls my mother in New Orleans to find me in Washington to do something about his photographer. And of course about an hour and a half later the Senate calls back and says: We have a problem, we think we lost a Congressman, there's something bad going on down here. So that sort of thing, the least likely set of circumstances. Here's this religious nut with lots of political connections from the old days. Now down there in a country with whom we've had a interesting background. And we in fact missed some marks there, we missed some steps, and the thing of course turns into this ungodly, horrible, wretched, tragic wipeout. And then of course great recriminations about a number of things. And I have to say, institutionally there was initially an inclination to wrap it up in a clinch and not concede very much. It was bad business for awhile.

Q: Did you have a problem getting, you might say, the State Department to air its dirty linen.

CARTER: Yeah, there was a vast amount of resistance. That's what I mean about going into a clinch. And I didn't prepare to brief for this in the sense of thinking that this one again. But I remember in some ways I probably got beat up more about that than on many issues. The ideologues and the other fringe reporters in the room would later beat the hell out of me about Nicaragua. That sort of thing. But I mean beat me vicariously that is, as a substitute for somebody like the Secretary of the President. But Guyana was really a bad one because it sort of had less to do with sort of overt and obvious ideological knife and ax grinding and much more to do institutional competence. And there was so much going on on that inside the building. And in fact some people were settling scores with each other inside the building on that one.

Q: I observed that from outside, there was a consular officer in Korea at that time and I thought, yeah the knives were out all over the place on that one.

CARTER: Yes they were, that was a stunning and unfortunately I saw one of those things that I had more of that vague memory that I'd just be happier if that hadn't happened. I won't give any specifics.

Q: Did you have problems say with the White House, some of the staff, because within any administration, the Carter administration had an ideological bent. Did you find yourself having problems bringing them up to understand the realities of the world?

CARTER: It hardly has anything to do with the nature of the ideology. Every new presidential team essentially wants to reinvent the wheel to begin with. The second thing is every presidential team believes that the problem is not policy, it's the people who are not implementing it correctly. And every presidential team believes that, because it is cultivated to believe this, that institution 8 or 9 blocks away is essentially not living in the same world as the President and his needs. And when I say cultivated to feel that way, it is institutionally in the interest of those who are the National Security team up close to constantly feed the paranoia which is always present. That everything would be fine if only somebody would just do what I want better. And the State Department is one of the ones that the President always wishes would do what he wants better. And so that's always a problem. And now do we call that educating the White House, on bringing them up to speed on what the realities are, that's not exactly the way it is. There was for instance, a vast amount of rage over at the White House about stories that appeared to be coming somewhere in State in the early days when the Shah was falling. In which it seemed that career foreign service officers were backgrounding the press and saying that it doesn't matter what the official line is, this man's in trouble.

Q: You were talking about some officers leaking about the Shah.

CARTER: Well, again I'm being very careful here, (Portion was erased, tape continues in mid-dialogue) ...dutiful regularity by Mr. Brzezinski to make sure that the President would understand that the traitors lay somewhere else attacking the brilliance of the policy, and which was the Shah was invulnerable. Whoever was doing it. The President went really berserk. At a given point he called the Secretary of State, the Deputy, all the Assistant Under Secretaries, me, we were all brought over to sit in the Roosevelt room. The President walked in and he said, "I have a problem, you're the problem. You're going to these parties and talking too much. I'm trying to make a policy work." He said, "I will tell you now, the next time there's a leak out of that Department, and I can trace it to any one of your bureaus, you're fired." Then he pushed back his chair and he walked out. As my not yet quite wife, no she was by then my wife, was rising out of her chair and saying, "Jimmy we have to be..." He's gone. And there was, and I say that because there was a very strong sense that (no she wasn't my wife yet) the State Department wasn't enough on wood, certain parts of the team. There was also a problem of course that there was not a terribly consistent policy on Iran and there was an unfinished set of fights going on about what the policy was. And that was always a problem, whether it was Human Rights or whether it was Iran or whether it was lots of things. Particularly Soviet Relations that always made for a problem in terms of the perception of the White House staffers about State Department loyalty. At one point as was to happen before and may have happened again, pardon me, did happen again and may have happened before, there was an effort made to have people take lie detector tests to see who was leaking. I always say that George Shultz and I do share one thing, besides having both gone to Princeton, I refuse to take the damn thing. And so did he but I was a little lower. Because I thought it was nonsense. But in any case, it was often a truth, often is too often, several times Jody (Powell) called up and in effect said: You guys are screwing us. Later I learned that Jody believed that he was sending me a personal warning as much as he was sending the Department a warning. But the way it was presented at the time was, I saw it as a general warning that the State Department was not in step and heads would have to roll and this and that was going to have to happen. Later as I say, I understand that they thought that they were protecting me because Brzezinski would often go in, insisting that I was the one doing these terrible attacks on him. With that I had been, but anyway.

Q: In a way, having your conferences televised, you have the tapes I suppose.

CARTER: Oh yes but that wasn't the point. The point was backgrounders. I mean, the point was what was said in the corridor. No, no the press conferences were bland enough. I really ought to say one other thing about the press conferences, I told those guys they could bring in the cameras because they said they really want them for the serious business of recording State Department press conferences. And I said, you can keep the cameras in as long as that's what they're doing. And the first time you catch me scratching myself or picking my nose or some fun and games moment, which is not the business and which would not be what a print guy would be recording, they come out. And so that basically you know you never saw anything out of the briefings except the bland meeting the blind. I mean I was always up there just going, "Uh, uh, nuh, nuh." The press briefings went on for an hour and there was a lot of what we'd call "grabass" in those things but that didn't get recorded on television.

Q: After all if you've got reporters who are credited to the Department of State wandering all over there. They're going to know more. If there's a real problem with the policy, no matter what you tell people to say, I mean particularly with the Shah, I mean this is no secret at all. That the Shah was in deep trouble, I mean that's what a paper is suppose to be reporting.

CARTER: Of course. Now you know, this is nonsense. I would say however that because it's such nonsense, later administration, that is the one that followed us, decided that there is a logical imperative. And that was that reporters can't walk all over the floors. I mean you know. And access to the building became tighter and tighter. That still leaves the telephone of course. But even that got recorded. I mean standards were imposed there that hadn't existed before. But certainly at our time, I mean the whole deal was, I mean because these guys knew so much, because they'd been around so long, they knew the building. They knew the information people, and the information people are not just going to sit there and just listen to some political nonsense coming out some place without at least suggesting every now and then that something's off about this. I'd travel with one or two of those guys and they'd look at me and cock their eye at me and say, "Hodding, would you deny ... " (INTERRUPTION-tape continues mid-dialogue) And the President had a very strong sense that we needed to have a different kind of approach to the Soviet Union. An interesting thing is that the beef that Vance carried with him to Moscow was so different as to, in Moscow's point of view, seem reactionary. Because rather than building on Vladivostok, it really went immediately to deep cuts. The cuts were in fact the intercessionary, intercession of Brzezinski who wanted to really do something major to cut this not as opposed to continue to negotiate a series of limited agreements as SALT II per se. At the same time, the administration also went off to that meeting carrying the proposition that it was going to be an open administration. So Cy in effect, had a briefing after every meeting for the press in Moscow. Convincing Russians even further, if that has anything to do with what they really thought, that not only are you not serious with our proposition, which was deep cuts, therefore we're really trying to notch you, but second that we weren't serious because we were talking about everything all the time. I'm saying all these things simply because it was a much more mixed message. The Secretary was open, too open for the Russians, the proposition. And of course we had, people forget this, the first 2 pronouncements of any sort that had to do with Human Rights, had to do with Charter 77 (Czechoslovakia) and they had to do with probably Sakharov, one of the great Soviet dissidents. Bang. I mean right off the buck. So there was this whole mixed thing, one, we said we wanted new arrangements, new relationship. Two, that it seems to them that they're getting a bunch of bangs in the chops. Which I would say parenthetically I was all for it, be that as it may. Then on the negotiating, on the fallback when you're sent back to square one, when they just flatly reject everything, in the March meeting, in Moscow. Then you have then what amounts to civil war inside the administration which never was resolved. There was the State Department position and Brzezinski constantly saying, this thing is either not good enough or it is conceding too much or whatever. And a wrenching battle which would come right down to last minute deals like when in a moment of negotiation there would suddenly be a little turn in the instructions coming back from Washington. That Cy would find out about it in a telephone conversation, he'd take a break. So there is that schizophrenia approach. And then there's the President's growing education as he at least described it, about the true nature of what he was facing. The education of Jimmy Carter which finally has this expression of him saying-that it took Afghanistan for him to understand. Now I always thought that was a remarkable phrase for its lack of felicity and I have to say accuracy. I mean it was something that he had said and it has always been used as an example of how he finally got to the point that he understood. That the Soviet Union was implacably advancing on all fronts. It was much more complex than that, frankly. The other problem was there were a number of positions but no totally thought through policy coming in to the administration.

Q: We're probably having some of the same problems with, right now we're dealing with the Clinton administration, and you watch a new administration particularly when it's taking over from a different type of administration, people trying to make their mark quickly. They think it's easy and it's not easy and never has been easy.

CARTER: I would only say about that though, you see that's a part that you just have to always say when you see people. The people who are close to the Clinton administration in foreign policy right now, some of them have been around this track for 35 years. I mean some of them have been career foreign service officers as well as politicals. Almost all of them have held high ranking positions in policy positions at least in one other administration, some of them in 3 or 4. So it's not peoples' lack of experience or even knowledge. You have to say it the way it is. Presidents. And then they serve, I mean what the hell, I mean George Shultz didn't come to town yesterday, neither did Al Haig. I mean these guys were around. Certainly not Warren (Christopher). Cy Vance had been Secretary of the Army, Under Secretary of Defense, negotiating things from Cyprus to Vietnam. This is not lack of experience. But the President. The problem is always the President in the presidency, having to learn anew.

Q: Were you with Vance for example in Moscow.

CARTER: Yes.

Q: I'm a foreign service officer who's never dealt particularly with negotiations but it does seem like you don't walk out of negotiations and keep announcing what you're doing. I mean it louses things up. It looks like you're playing to the grandstand. Was this a matter of discussion?

CARTER: I have no idea, I was so new then. I only thought at the time, sure, you can do it. Let me argue incidentally, that I won't accept your proposition. But it has to be done with a lot of skill and you basically have to not say a hell of a lot and you've got to sort of mainly do whatever dirty work you want to do the way Kissinger always did, which was on background. But no, but not handled well, it's about as dumb an idea as I can think of if you're trying to make the negotiation work. And Cy hated it. I mean he didn't want to do it. It certainly ran counter to anything he had ever dreamed of a way a negotiation would work.

Q: Yeah because he came out of, basically he's a lawyer.

CARTER: He's a lawyer and it just that he hated it. And so did not do it all that well because he hated it so much. Because you can do that, you can go out and say-Look, ladies and gentleman, it's quite clear we're not going to talk about this but I can comment we've covered a great deal of territory-the usual stuff and go on with it. Sort of giving the appearance of popular transparency without the reality but that was not done that well. But that was part of the philosophy. Which was, obviously, that we were going to be a more open administration. It did not last all that long. But it was certainly, well, I say that cynically, it was more open on its worst day then the Reagan administration was on its best. But that's a different question.

Q: Did you find yourself going through a learning curve about dealing with the Soviets?

CARTER: Of course there are all sets of learning curves. I mean to be argumentative, the first thing you learn is that if you want to make it easy you do it their way. And the second thing you learn is that doing it easy may not be the right way to do it. And that maybe you've got to make them do it your way. By the end of course everybody was knowledgeable enough that everybody was playing the game the other person's way. It was a fairly fast learning curve actually as far as that part of it went. But it had to be done over and over again. I mean what this Oral History is going to establish when contrasted to others is that just as I've said, it is the President about whom you should be most interested when it comes to each administration's handling of foreign policy. It is also true that differences in Secretaries of State makes a vast difference in how that sort of public policy aspect is handled. It's entirely up to them. Cy gave a briefing after we came out of China. He was not at all happy that we were playing that card down at that particular moment. Because he thought we were right on the verge of getting SALT II finished and he thought that thumping down the China card right then would mean that the Russians would say, oh wait. Again, whether right or wrong that doesn't matter. But he gave a press conference when we came out. And afterwards his closest aides went in and said, "Mr. Secretary, it'd be better never to have another press conference then to ever have a press conference like that one again." Because he hated the idea of saying anything so much that he simply infuriated the whole press corps. Which wondered why they had spent the hour with him. Cause he wouldn't answer a damn thing.

Q: I have a feeling that much of Kissinger's effectiveness, if you want to call it that, at least more personal thing, was the fact that he could work with the press on a private matter. You were dealing with a Secretary...

CARTER: Not his style at all, it made it worse. If you have a bunch of extremely smart hunting dogs who in the previous owners time had been kept out of fear and strain by being fed the choice morsels up close to the kennel. And then you come in with a guy who doesn't want to feed them even close or long. They start ranging all over hell, biting at your ass. And Kissinger in fact had most of them in the palm of his hand because he did for them what every reporter wants, which is to make them feel that they are a part of the great enterprise itself. And that they were let in to his thinking and what they thought of it was important. Vance would never have lied to them that much. He just didn't have it in him.

Q: Did you try to bring him around?

CARTER: Listen. I want to say something to you. I have a limited amount ego but I have a fair amount of sense. And for me to pretend that I was leading the guy around would be one, bad history, and two, stupid politics. All his aides and much closer people to him than me, were always trying to get him to do, and finally I remember one time him saying to us, and I think probably after we all got the nerve to go in collectively after the China, he said, "God help me, reality is I am a negotiator, I'm a man who believes you do your best work behind the door and you come up with the best process that anybody out in the public, and you take your lumps." He said, "I'm a lawyer and I'm not going to change." And that was it and that was after the disaster of the China press conference. So there wasn't much that was going to happen about that. I mean that was it. He wasn't going to go to PR school. He was 60 while he was there, which I regard as being very young. What I mean is at the time, he had figured he gotten where he was because he did it the way he did it.

Q: Did you find that life was different on these trips that you took with the Secretary? I'm not talking about the press, but the way you dealt with the press, was this a good way to...

CARTER: It was always very intimate, very alive, an awful lot of interaction. It is of course utterly the best interest of the Secretary of State to take this group with him. I can give you an illustration of that. When we were walking around the Middle East carrying a letter from the President to Begin and Sadat and hiding the fact that we were doing it by dropping in Jerusalem and the usual other stops. The reporters were completely perplexed as to what the hell was going on. And they kept asking, why were we talking about proximity talks, why were we doing this and doing that. To which there was no answer except that we were continuing the peace process. And finally Valeriani who really is the toughest reporter ever wrought, the NBC correspondent said the hell with this and he got off the plane in Amman and said goodbye to us. He did what a reporter ought to do. He turned around and asked his sources around the Palace, what the hell was Vance carrying around. And somebody, I always thought it was Prince Hassan, told him. He had the story 3 days before it was anywhere else. Saying that Vance is carrying a letter from Carter to Begin and Sadat. He wants them to come to Camp David. But nobody actually believed it because nobody in the real traveling corps, fed kept people, had heard anything like that. But when we say Begin, one of them asked, "There's a report on NBC that President Carter has sent you a letter inviting you to Washington. Is that true?" Begin-No, absolutely not. We had just been in the room and handed him the letter. My point only is that keeping the press on that plane, traveling with you, and sort of dealing with them very close up, really did dull the edge of a lot of what they otherwise might be getting. I'm speaking quite cynically as a person who really wants them to be not too far off. John Chancellor of NBC once sat down on the floor next to me at the signing at Vienna of SALT II. It was late in the night and he said, "Well Hodding, with my mates down there, have the State Department team taken off their jackets yet?" I said, "What team jackets?" And he said, "The Kissinger jackets." And I said correctly, no. Because there was still longing for Henry's style, which was immensely seductive and beguiling for that group of people. As I say, that is not what the Secretary wanted at all. He just wanted me to go out there and distance us from trouble. You know, to handle it as best I could.

Q: With the whole Iran business and the hostage thing, towards the end, you were still there when there was a failed attempt to rescue. How did this hit you?

CARTER: It was a fascinating things actually. The American Newspaper Publishers Association had its annual meeting that year in Hawaii. And the Secretary turned down an invitation to go speak to them on American foreign policy. And they sent me instead. But right before I went, I went up to see him on a Monday night and I said, "Well Mr. Secretary, is there anything I need to know in particular." He said, no. I said, well any advice? And he said yes, be careful. And we laughed and I went on out to the plane on Tuesday, gave my talk on Wednesday. In the course of which the last question was asked by Dave Laventhol who now is the head of Times-Mirror Corp., the publisher of Newsday, he said, "Alright Hodding, you've explained why we're not going to use military force to get the prisoners out, and that's fine, but certainly someday we're going to have to do it if we don't get them out, how will we know when that day has come?" And I said, it'll be like the duck-you can tell when he waddles and quacks. And I said, "But that day has not come." Wednesday. Then I go out to the beach and take the day off and take the Thursday night overnight from Hawaii back. Halfway over the Pacific, the flight attendant shakes me and says, "Oh my God, Mr. Carter, I'm so sorry." I said-so sorry about what? "So sorry about the raid." I said-what raid? Which is how the State Department spokesman learned about Desert One. And she took me out to the Captain who had been listening to Jody's briefing. And they had a plane for me at Dallas and they flew me up to Washington. My wife meets me at Dulles and we drive in a car back to the State Department listening to Harold Brown explaining what a brilliant idea it was despite its failure. And get up there and Cy is giving a going-away lunch for Bill Maynes who was leaving as head of IODA, I guess by-lingo of foreign policy, I don't know, anyway resigning. And after lunch was over Cy says, "I know you've been flying all night but I need to talk to you." And he takes me upstairs, no he took me downstairs to his office. And he says, "I want to apologize for not telling you about the raid." I said-Mr Secretary, that's fine. I never thought that I was going to be told about military and I didn't, it doesn't bother me at all. I said, a few of my old buddies probably think I lied to them out there in Hawaii. We laughed about that. But he said, "There's a second thing I didn't tell you. Before you left," he said, "I resigned as Secretary of State." Which he had, on the previous Friday. When his reclama didn't work. And I said, "That's a problem." But then he said, "There are a lot of people putting a lot of pressure on me to rethink it so I'm holding it, my formal handing it in." You know he resigned, going back and reaffirming it after the furor. The fact of the matter is, it hit me very hard. I mean the whole thing hit me hard. The other thing is by that time I had become his spokesman as opposed to a Carter administration person. I had become personally connected to him. And so, but he said for us to stay and I decided to stay. Which I did until July 1st. But sometime in June the President decided to come out of the Rose Garden strategy and he gave a speech up in Philadelphia. And somewhere in the middle of it or in a question and answer period, after he said something about being so happy to have Ed Muskie, because it was good to have a statesman like figure as Secretary of State. And it just really made me so goddamn mad that I said, "I quit." Again parenthetically, I've known Ed forever and I think he's a great guy and enjoyed working for him. But I just thought that was so damn disloyal of the President to a guy who had actually been a decent man so I quit. I did not quit because of the war, I didn't quit because of the failed raid, I didn't agree with Cy actually, I think there are times when you do military stuff. But it doesn't matter about that. But it was a deluge, a devastating sort of thing obviously for the country. And for the administration most specifically and for the guys who died out there. But for Cy, it was the final thing for Cy. Because he had lost that vote within the National Security Council. And I think that was the end of it for him. But as far as handling it, I mean you know, it was just another bit of business. The fact of the matter is, and this is just a matter of my background, I just figured it was the best thing that Bob McCloskey ever told me because it confirmed my feeling. He had been State Department spokesman twice, once for Lyndon and once with Kissinger, who had been the two most difficult people to have the job under. And Bob said, the only good advice I got from any of my predecessors, and I talked to almost all of them; some of whom insisted that I never, never show that I didn't know something. Damn foolish thing I ever heard. Anyway, Bob said, "Always remember these guys are professionals doing their job and you treat them with respect, and you demand that they treat you like a professional with respect doing your job." It was a twin thing. And frankly I enjoyed it the whole time. Once I had plugged into the building, once I had got to know the folk there, and once I was part of that, I didn't give a damn. The toughness of the issue went with the territory. And the rest of it, the part you hated was you hated when Spike was killed, you hated when something bad happened. But not the process. One of my predecessors who was notorious for when the briefing was over, went back up to his office, running in, grabbing about a lot of things, knocking back one and screaming at the top of his voice-he hated them! He hated the policy, he hated the whole process.

Q: You have to be the right attitude.

CARTER: You really must because of course, once you think it's personal, once you think for that matter, once your boss sends you out there to bat, I mean, then you know.

Q: Did you notice the proclivity of the foreign service to kind of hate the press and not really understand that it was a major part of the process.

CARTER: Actually old Bob Anderson used to always come around and he'd say, "You know damn it, you're in a position to do something about it. We've got to add about 8 hours out there in the Foreign Service Institute in training these people." He said, "I've been at it too long, I couldn't change but we've got to undo this attitude. It kills us. It kills us." And it's true. I hope they're doing more out at that wonderful new facility actually.

Q: Well, this will be part of the record. Well I want to thank you very much. This is a lot more than I expected.

CARTER: Well I appreciate it.

End of interview